

THOUGHTS THAT DO LIE TOO DEEP FOR TEARS: COMPARATIVE LITERATURE VERSUS WORLD LITERATURE

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Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn...
—John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale,” ll. 65-67

What difference does it make if you read, teach, or write about a given piece of literature in the context of comparative literature or, alternatively, in the context of world literature? Both comparative literature and world literature tend to presuppose that you understand a given work better if you set it against other works as a means of identifying similarities and differences. Literary study, in my strongly held view, must be focused, above all, on the interpretation of individual literary works. Reading a few poems word by word, carefully, interrogatively, is worth much more than bushels of theory read in a vacuum, in the absence of examples. Literary theory and disciplinary organizations for the study of literature, for example, the theory and discipline of comparative literature as against the relatively new theory and discipline of world literature, are all ancillary to that. Theory and departmental divisions are handmaidens to the real business of reading specific literary works. As a consequence, any theoretical formulations should be anchored on specific examples. Without that, such theoretical formulations might be, as they sometimes are, speculations in the void, without empirical verification. Such formulations are like saying the moon is made of green cheese, or that dark matter is finely powdered carbon. You need to look at some samples of these to see whether these assertions are right. In the case of dark matter, getting a sample has turned out to be rather difficult, to say the least. (Yes, dear reader, I am aware that this paragraph is theoretical through and through. It is a theoretical repudiation of theory’s primacy over close reading.)

A new humanities discipline, however, world literature, has recently appeared,

both in the United States and in many other countries, as a fresh context for literary study. It is easy to see why this has happened. Comparative literature has tended to be a Western discipline that is strongly Eurocentric. It focuses on comparisons among works in English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Czech, and other European languages, for example, the Scandinavian ones. English has tended to be the dominant language in comparative literature, even when a Czech like René Wellek taught it and practiced it in brilliantly learned books and essays. Globalization and the new digital media have meant that an American, Chinese, German, or South African scholar now has, by way of the Internet, instant access both in translation and in the original languages to literature from all over the world. Voilà: world literature! This means that familiar works in Western literature, for example, Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" or Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," have new contexts that change in various ways how we read and value them.

I have written elsewhere about the dangers, as I see them, of world literature: the increased difficulty in identifying truly representative examples of, say, Chinese or Arabic or Urdu literature; the unlikelihood that a single scholar could know all the requisite languages, whereas Wellek knew most Western languages; the danger that world literature will be, in the end, just another example of the hegemony of the English language and of Western ideas of what literature is and what its social function is. World literature is in danger of being just another example of Western cultural imperialism.

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In this essay, I want, by way of the word "tears" in a passage in one canonical work in nineteenth-century Romantic English literature, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," to see what can be said about reading that word in the context of world literature as opposed to reading it in the context of comparative literature. Here is the passage again: "Perhaps the self-same song that found a path / Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn." What is the difference between reading Keats's poem, or, rather, that one word in one passage in it, in the context of world-wide passages that mention tears, or, alternatively, in the context of European poems that mention tears? These include "Vale of Tears" in Psalm 84:6 of the Old Testament,¹ to the shortest verse in the King James Bible, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35),² or, in the *Iliad* XXIV, Priam's tears for Hektor and Achilles's tears for Peleus, or Andromache's tears in *Iliad* VI and XXII and in Euripides's *Andromache*, or in Racine's poem of the same name, not to speak of Eurycleia's tears when she recognizes the returned Odysseus while washing his feet in *Odyssey* XIX, on down through the weeping centuries. Ruth, after all, is the title character in a wonderful book of the Christian Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible. I want to identify what actually happens when I read the word "tears" in Keats's lines with either of the two contexts in mind: world literature or Eurocentric comparative literature.

I chose the motif of tears for this essay somewhat arbitrarily, partly because I have already written elsewhere about a poem that means a lot to me for various reasons, Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears," partly perhaps because I do not shed tears easily or at

all, even in situations in which one might think tears would be appropriate and natural. Partly because of my failure as a weeper, tears fascinate me as involuntary bodily effusions that at the same time function “performatively,” in the sense J.L. Austin gave to that word in *How to Do Things with Words*. Tears are external signs that confess, often unwillingly, to internal feelings that might otherwise remain hidden. A confession is a performative speech act. It is a way of doing something with words or other signs. Involuntary tears that confess to hidden inner feelings, I am claiming, can function as a strange kind of speech act or sign act.

I also tacitly assumed that the examples of tears in poems would be manageable in number. How wrong I was, as I ought to have known. My examples from the Western tradition come from a long series of tears in literature going back to the Bible and Greek literature. Moreover, a little searching with that marvellous tool, the Internet, reveals in a moment such entries as one entitled “Tears Poems.” That site gives pages of citations, not one of which I recognized, from tears poems from around the world.³

380 A Google search for “tears poetry in Urdu” brings up a whole series of websites, as does a search for “tears poetry in Arabic.” Clearly, innumerable poems in all languages have tears in them. Furthermore, I have not even mentioned all those places in works of fiction in which tears are shed. Thousands and thousands of them exist in all the languages in which fictional works have been written; one example is Ivan’s story of the tortured child’s tears in *The Brothers Karamazov*.⁴

The mind boggles. Faced with this immense global chorus of literary tears, how in the world could I do a justifiable study of weeping in literature, either in a Eurocentric comparative literature context or in the context of world literature? Let me dare to generalize about this: To perform written studies or teaching either in comparative literature or in world literature means making choices of texts to “compare.” These choices are, in the end, and to a considerable degree, arbitrary. They are, perforce, not really “representative.” They are not rationally defensible as the only “right” ones. The choices manifest accident, or personal liking, or obedience to some convention or syllabus. The choices made of what to “compare” are not texts the two disciplines can theoretically justify as “typical.”

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Let me, then, start again from the beginning and set my citation from Keats first in the context of some tears that come to my mind from European literature, and then in the context of some tears from an eleventh-century anthology of Sanskrit poetry that I happen to have in translation in my library. I stress the accidental nature of my choices for contextual comparisons. My examples from European literature come from many centuries and many national literatures, whereas my Sanskrit examples are all from one famous eleventh-century anthology. The two sets of poems are not commensurate as “selections” from an immense body of possible choices in both

cases. Adducing them is arbitrary and contingent. Such contingency is in one way or another essential to the practice of both comparative literature and world literature as academic disciplines. It is also essential never to forget, as I have stressed, that the goal or end in both disciplines is to make us better readers of specific literary works.

I have already listed a number of tears poems in the Western tradition, from the Bible and the Greeks to those “thoughts that do lie too deep for tears” in Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode.” Let me add a few more that spring to mind or that I found in a quick interrogation by way of Google. I am just listing them and making no pretense at making anything like a reading, even of the extracted citations. Doing that would require a big book of essays. They are, moreover, as I have said, a more or less random chronological list of some Western tears poems, without any claim that they are inclusive or even typical. They are all, however, from “canonical” Western works. I cite them from conveniently available websites, partly as an example of the way the Internet has, willy-nilly, transformed literary study for those who have a computer and a connection to the Internet.

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I begin with Dido. I could write a whole book about renditions of Dido’s desertion by Aeneas as told by Virgil (71 BC to 19 BC) in Book Four of the *Aeneid* (29-19 BC) and then by Ovid (43 BC to 17 AD) in the *Heroides*. Dido’s only parallel among deserted women in classical literature is perhaps Ariadne, who was abandoned by Theseus and left in solitude on the island of Naxos.⁵ Both Virgil and Ovid mention Dido’s tears explicitly. Here is Virgil’s Dido reproaching the faithless Aeneas:

Mene fugis? Per ego has lacrimas dextramque tuam te
(quando aliud mihi iam miserae nihil ipsa reliqui),
per conubia nostra, per inceptos hymenaeos,
si bene quid de te merui, fuit aut tibi quicquam
dulce meum, miserere domus labentis et istam,
oro, si quis adhuc precibus locus, exue mentem.

Do you flee from me? By these tears and by your hand,
(since I have already left behind nothing else for wretched me),
through our marriage, though the marriage rights which were begun,
if I ever deserved anything well of you, or if anything at all of mine
was sweet to you, take pity on the falling house, and if there is any place still for prayers,
take away this attitude, I beg you. (ll. 314-19)

Here is a bit of the famous testimonial letter from Dido to Aeneas in Ovid’s *Heroides* (43 BC):

adspicias utinam, quae sit scribentis imago;
scribimus, et gremio Troicus ensis adest;
perque genas lacrimae strictum labuntur in ensem,
qui iam pro lacrimis sanguine tinctus erit. (Epistula VII)

I wish you could see my appearance as I write:
I write, and a Trojan sword lies in my lap:

and tears fall from my cheeks onto the naked blade,
which will soon be stained with tears of blood. (*Poetry in Translation*)

Dido's story is told or mentioned again and again through the centuries, by, among many others, Chaucer in *The Legend of Good Women*, Shakespeare's Hamlet in an adjuration to the players to retell "Aeneas's tale to Dido" (II.ii. 453), Marlowe in his first play, *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (1587), Henry Purcell in his *Dido and Aeneas* (ca. 1680-88), with its famous and very beautiful "Dido's Lament," Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid* (1697), on down to Berlioz's wonderful grand opera, *Les Troyens* (1858).⁶

My next example is from *Beowulf*: the tears of King Hrothgar when he parts from Beowulf near the climax of the poem. Hrothgar fears, correctly, that he may never see Beowulf alive again:

382 Gecyste þā cyning æðelum gōd,
þēoden Scildinga, þegen betstan
and be healse genam; hruron him tēaras,
blonden-feaxum: him wæs bēga wēn,
1875 ealdum infrōdum, oðres swīðor,
þæt hī seoððan gesēon mōston
mōdige on mēðle. (*Beowulf: An Anglo-Saxon Poem*)

Then kissed the king of kin renowned,
Scyldings' chieftain, that choicest thane,
and fell on his neck. Fast flowed the tears
of the hoary-headed. Heavy with winters,
he had chances twain, but he clung to this,
that each should look on the other again,
and hear him in hall. (*Beowulf*)

In one of his soliloquies, Shakespeare's Hamlet remembers his mother, Gertrude, weeping crocodile tears for the death of her husband, King Hamlet, that is, Hamlet's father. Gertrude is, says Hamlet, "like Niobe, all tears" (I.ii. 149). Niobe, in an episode in the *Iliad*, wept for the death of all her children. Leto sent Apollo and Artemis to slay Niobe's seven sons and seven daughters as punishment for her proud hubris about her good fortune in having so many children. Hamlet makes the comparison ironically, of course, since he thinks his mother, most un-Niobe-like, was eager to have her husband dead so she could marry Claudius, Hamlet's uncle. "O most wicked speed," Hamlet says, "to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets" (I.ii. 156). In Hamlet's view, Gertrude is committing incest by marrying her dead husband's brother.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* contains many tears, but everyone who has read the poem in its entirety is likely to remember Adam and Eve's tears at the very end of the poem, after they have been cast out of Paradise:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.

They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way. (Milton 374)

In “Eloisa to Abelard,” Alexander Pope has Eloisa weep when she reopens Abelard’s letters to her:

Soon as thy letters trembling I unclose,
That well-known name awakens all my woes.
Oh name for ever sad! for ever dear!
Still breath’d in sighs, still usher’d with a tear. (Pope)

In 1801, Goethe wrote a poem entitled “Troost in Tränen” (“Comfort in Tears”). The poem has been translated in many different versions, into English and into many other languages as well. Many composers, including Schubert and Brahms, have set it to music. With its cheerfulness about tears, the poem seems to have had a wide and irresistible attraction all over Europe. “Troost in Tränen” is a dialogue in which the protagonist explains to his friends that he finds “comfort in tears”:

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Und hab ich einsam auch geweint,
So ist mein eigener Schmerz,
Und Tränen fließen gar so süß,
Erleichtern mir das Herz. (ll. 5-8)

And if I have been weeping alone,
It is my own sorrow,
And my tears flow so sweetly
That they make my heart light. (Ezust)

I have already mentioned Wordsworth’s lines about not weeping that come at the very end of his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” (written 1802-04, published 1807):

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears. (ll. 205-08)

Just what kind of thoughts are “too deep for tears”? I assume they must be very sad indeed. For Wordsworth, each person is immortal because he or she has a deathless soul that comes from Heaven and will return to it, eventually to be incarnated again in a new mortal body. The poem itself makes it clear that Wordsworth laments not only the loss in adulthood of the sense of immortality that he ascribes to everyone in childhood, but also the loss of a sensitivity possessed by birds and lambs, as well as children, to all natural things: “Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves” (l. 192). A natural thing, such as “the meanest flower that blows,” functions as a sign of immortality. Wordsworth defines immortality as a form of the transmigration of souls. The meanest flower that blows generates deep thoughts. These thoughts are extremely moving as intimations or indirect glimpses of immortality; they are so

moving that they “often are too deep for tears.” Wordsworth is so moved and the thoughts are so deep that he often cannot weep. Wordsworth’s thoughts are “deep” in the sense of being “intimations,” glimpses, of things “way down,” almost out of sight. They are also “deep” in the sense we speak of the “profound thoughts” that inhabit what Wordsworth calls “the philosophic mind” (l. 191), for example Plato’s mind. Wordsworth’s assumptions about immortality are, broadly speaking, Platonic. According to Wordsworth, philosophical thoughts, however moving, often do not make you cry, because they are too deep.

Next come the lines from Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” that are my epigraph, and my central example of tears in poetry. I note two features of Keats’s lines about Ruth. One is that, as in the case of Shakespeare’s reference to Niobe, here is another reference to a detail in one of the two great sources of our European tradition, Greek literature and the Bible. That tradition is fragmenting and dispersing today. Many students today assigned Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” would be likely to ask, “Who in the world is Niobe?”, or “Who in the world is Ruth?” *The Book of Ruth* is, of course, canonical in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible, but many students these days know neither.

The other feature I want to stress in Keats’s hauntingly beautiful lines is that her tears are caused by homesickness, not by any of the things that cause tears in my other examples. Ruth is “amid the alien corn.” (“Corn” is what we in the United States and Canada call wheat.) All the plants, animals, and weather in Bethlehem-judah are strange to her, alien, as were all the surrounding things for me when we moved from New Haven, Connecticut, to Irvine, California. I was not, and never became, “at home” in California, nor was Ruth, presumably, ever really at home in Bethlehem, even though it is not by any means as far from Moab as California is from Connecticut.

The Biblical text says nothing whatsoever about Ruth’s tears of homesickness. Those tears are Keats’s invention. In *The Book of Ruth*, revered by Jews and Christians alike, Ruth the Moabite famously pledges allegiance to her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi: “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so unto me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me” (Ruth 1:16-17). *Ruth* is about land transference, not about homesickness. Boaz must marry Ruth in order to keep a valuable parcel of land in the family. Or, alternatively, *The Book of Ruth* earns its place in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles because Ruth, the alien from Moab, through her exogamy, becomes the great-grandmother of King David and then the direct ancestress of the Saviour, Jesus of Nazareth. As a “reading” of *The Book of Ruth*, Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” beautiful as the passage about Ruth’s tears is, fails dismally.

I have written at length elsewhere about my next example, Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Tears, Idle Tears,” a song from *The Princess*:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
 Tears from the depth of some divine despair
 Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
 In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
 And thinking of the days that are no more.⁷

This poem has been important to me for many years because it was puzzling about it that moved me, back in 1950, to change, as a sophomore at Oberlin College, from majoring in physics to majoring in English literature. As I have said in “Literature Matters,” I asked myself, “What in the world does this mean?” What does Tennyson mean by calling his tears idle? In what sense are these tears idle? Why did he write, “I know not what they mean”? I did not know what they mean either. The poem is very beautiful. There is no doubt about that, but so what? And “tears from the depth of some divine despair”? What does “divine despair” mean? It must mean the despair of some god. What god? Gods are not supposed to despair. What is this god in despair about? Why are the autumn fields happy? I thought they were merely inhuman matter. In short, I had dozens of questions about just these few lines. It seems to me that simply to read the poem out loud to students, as teachers often used to do, and to say how beautiful it is, is not enough. I agree that it is beautiful, but what does it *mean*? I think we are justified in demanding a high degree of “explicability” from literary works and in demanding that our teachers help students in this hermeneutic work.

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I shall not repeat here all that I have said about Tennyson’s poem. For the purposes of this essay, however, I note that the cause of the speaker’s tears differs from every one of the tears-generating causes in my other Eurocentric examples. In Tennyson’s poem, the cause of the tears is not Ruth’s homesickness, nor Niobe’s grief for her dead children, nor Goethe’s happy tears, but the unlikely effect of looking on the happy autumn fields and thinking of the days that are no more. Tennyson’s tears are closest to Wordsworth’s non-tears, the latter generated by the meanest flower that blows.

As I expected, tears appear in Baudelaire’s “Fleurs du mal,” most notably in the refrain of a poem about a fountain, “Le Jet d’eau”:

La gerbe épanouie
 En mille fleurs,
 Où Phoebé réjouie
 Met ses couleurs,
 Tombe comme une pluie
 De larges pleurs.

The sheaf unfolds into
 Countless flowers
 In which joyful Phoebe
 Puts her colours:
 It drops like a shower
 Of heavy tears. (Aggeler)

In Baudelaire's poem, the tears appear by way of a simile. The fountain's *gerbe* (sheaf) of water is "like a shower of large tears." They are not explicitly tears for any particular sorrow, though the reader is repeatedly invited, as the refrain recurs, to imagine someone weeping copiously. The "water-sheath" expands into "countless flowers," that is, multicolored droplets. These are associated, in a way we have seen in previous tears poems, with a Greek goddess, in this case Phoebe, one of the Titans. Phoebe is connected to the moon (Selene) and with the Oracle at Delphi. One of Selene's epithets is "Phoebe." Baudelaire may have simply meant "the moon" by "Phoebe." The name etymologically means "shining," which I suppose accounts for the multicoloured flowers Baudelaire imagines as visible in the fountain's jet, perhaps especially by moonlight. Those flowers are generated by dispersal of the light, perhaps moonlight, that hits the fountain and is redirected to the viewer. If he associated Phoebe with Selene, he may even have known that Silene (with an "i" instead of an "e") is the name of a genus of flowering plant, while Silenus is the companion and tutor of the wine god Dionysus. Baudelaire had a complicated figurative feeling about flowers. His book of poems is, after all, called *Flowers of Evil*. Baudelaire's reference to Phoebe is more complicated than Shakespeare's reference to Niobe. The refrain of "Le Jet d'eau" goes from water drops to flowers to Phoebe to tears, in a complex and provocative sequence.⁸

I shall cite two examples of tears in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems. The first is from "The Wreck of the Deutschland" (1876). The poet speaks to his "heart" about his tears when he hears of the nuns' drowning in the wreck of the Deutschland, a ship bringing religious refugees from Germany to England: "Why tears! Is it? tears; such a melting, a madrigal start!" (Hopkins 57; stanza 18). The tears are both like a melting of his heart's normal coldness and like a madrigal, that is, like a form of Renaissance unaccompanied vocal part-song that usually involves a melody sung by one singer or group and echoed by another singer or group, in a statement and response pattern. Hopkins's heart's tears are a madrigal response to hearing of the nuns' death.

The second example from Hopkins is the beautiful poem he wrote in 1880 about weeping, "Spring and Fall: to a young child." In this poem, the speaker addresses the young child, Margaret, and asks her if she is "grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving," that is, the falling of tree leaves in the autumn. He tells her that when she grows up she "will weep and know why":

Now no matter, child, the name:
 Sórrows springs áre the same.
 Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
 What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
 It is the blight man was born for,
 It is Margaret you mourn for. (Hopkins 88-89)

The true source of Margaret's tears, the poet says, is human mortality and human beings' universal inheritance of original sin. The latter may mean an eternity in Hell, if Christ does not save us from that. Margaret's tears are somewhat like those of Adam

and Eve when cast out of the Garden of Eden. They differ in that the young Margaret does not understand the real reason for her tears, while Adam and Eve knew very well why they were crying. For a believing Christian, only one thing is really worth tears: the Fall of Man. However, not everyone knows that; hence, the need for priests, such as the author of this poem, Father Hopkins. Both of my examples of tears in Hopkins's poems have a religious dimension and are, in different ways, responses to human mortality and to Original Sin.

I skip some decades now to my last example of tears in European poems. This is a charming tears poem by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), the great Bohemian-Austrian poet. The poem I cite is the third poem in Rilke's *Herbstlieder* (*Autumn Poems*). It is short enough to quote in its entirety and in its English translation. The little vase of tears speaks the poem, in a forceful personification or prosopopoeia:

Tränenkrüglein

Andere fassen den Wein, andere fassen die Öle
in dem gehöhlten Gewölb, das ihre Wandung umschrieb.
Ich, als kleineres Maß, und als schlankestes, höhle
mich einem andern Bedarf, stürzenden Tränen zulieb.
Wein wird reicher, und Öl klärt sich noch weiter im Krüge.
Was mit den Tränen geschieht?—Sie machten mich schwer,
machten mich blinder und machten mich schillern am Buge,
machten mich brüchig zuletzt und machten mich leer.

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Little Vase of Tears

Others hold the wine, others hold the oils
in the hollowed vaults that their walls circumscribed.
I, as a lesser measure, and as slenderest, hollow
myself for another need, for the sake of plunging tears.
Wine becomes richer, and oil still more clear in the jug.
What happens with tears?—They made me heavy,
they made me blinder and made me shimmer at the breast,
they made me brittle at last and made me empty. (*Lyrics Translate*)

The source of the tears that the little pot holds is not specified, though the reader is told that they are *stürzenden Tränen* (falling tears). The tears are caught, I suppose, in the little pot as they fall or gush from someone's weeping eyes, though why he or she is weeping, we do not know. What this not altogether cheerful poem does tell the reader, however, is that the tears are corrosive. They make the little jug blinder, shimmering, brittle, and at last empty. I suppose this is because the jug is broken by the destructive effect of the tears, or because they evaporate. "Shimmer" is clear enough. The light would make the little jug-full of tears produce blinking light by reflection. "Blinder," however, is an odd epithet, unless you take it in one of its dictionary meanings, as more "dim," "clouded," "dull." The tears cloud the glass of the little jug. The translation, I believe, is incorrect here and misleading.

A final observation: When then-President Barack Obama, in one of his last acts as President, presented his Vice-President Joe Biden with the Medal of Freedom,

Biden “teared up” (Liptak and Malloy). I sum up this comparative literature section of my essay by saying that one could imagine a comparative literature undergraduate course or seminar, or even a graduate seminar, that would use the texts I have cited as the syllabus. Such a course would focus by way of the examples I adduce on the role of tears in European poetry. Each session could center on a single text and see how far the exploration of tears in a single text from European poetry could be carried. That would be a delightful course to teach.

The upshot of the investigation might be the conclusion that a single meaning, context, or origin for tears in poetry by no means exists in our tradition. In each of my examples, someone weeps for a different reason: the death of her children for Niobe, homesickness for Ruth, the consolation or “comfort” tears bring for Goethe, the fall of leaves in the autumn for Margaret, and so on. No universal law for what causes tears in these poems can be identified, beyond saying that strong emotion of any sort may lead to tears, such as the unexpected honor that made Joe Biden cry.

388 Finally, my class on tears in European poetry might deduce that in spite of the high degree of idiosyncrasy in each tears poem, quite a number of them make comparisons with tears in the Bible or in Greek literature. This confirms the assumption that those old texts are the bedrock of the European poetic tradition, multitudinous and inconsistent as the latter nevertheless is. Poetry from the Bible and Greek literature onward really does deserve the name “tradition,” though access to that tradition is weakening now. Shakespeare could assume the audience of *Hamlet* would know who Niobe was, whereas most students today have probably never heard of her. Niobe naturally came into Shakespeare’s mind as a wry comparison for Gertrude’s probably pretended tears over Hamlet’s murdered father’s corpse, just as thinking about all those innumerable nightingale calls through the ages, each similar to the one Keats heard in Highgate outside London, naturally made the poet think of Ruth.

I have heard a nightingale’s song only once in my life, years ago, in the Fiesole woods one night outside Florence, Italy. That song, I can testify, is both weirdly beautiful and, at the same time, somehow spooky, uncanny. This *Unheimlichkeit* arises partly through the listener’s sense that what he or she is hearing is identical to all the countless nightingale songs through the centuries. The song is both familiar and frighteningly strange.⁹

Keats’s poem is my chief example of the difference between comparative literature study and world literature study. It certainly ends with a great passage about Ruth’s tears of homesickness, but the poem as a whole is, I would claim, about the unity of the European tradition. That unity is expressed by way of the “self-same” nightingale’s song that has been heard by so many millions of European people over the centuries. The nightingale is primarily a European bird, except in the winter, when it goes south. There are no nightingales in the Americas, nor in India, China, or Japan. The nightingale breeds in forest and scrub in Europe and south-west Asia (hence, Ruth could have heard a nightingale), and winters in sub-Saharan Africa. The nightingale’s song has been “self-same” in all those places and through all those

centuries, just as a true tradition remains more or less the same wherever and whenever it subsists.

* * *

I turn now, much more briefly and sketchily, to the question of what happens if I try to read Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" in the context of world literature about tears. My first response is a sense of inadequacy. I can more or less read European tears poems in the original, with some help from translation, but though I can find URLs on the Internet for tears poems in Urdu and Arabic, I know neither of those languages, nor do I know any of the other dozens of non-European languages necessary to study or teach world literature, assuming the same scholarly assumptions of language competence are made for world literature as those we take for granted, or at least pretend to take for granted, for comparative literature. A book entitled *Crime Fiction as World Literature* will soon appear in a Bloomsbury Press series, *Literatures as World Literature*. The book is edited by Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D'haen, and includes essays by twenty different critics discussing crime fiction from Bulgaria, China, Israel, Mexico, Scandinavia, Kenya, Catalonia, Tibet, "and elsewhere" (*Bloomsbury News*). I am impressed by this. It is World Literature, but it takes twenty different critics, "in a wide-ranging panorama of the genre," as the blurb says, to gather within the covers of a single book essays by scholars possessing the requisite linguistic and cultural knowledge of crime fiction from around the world.

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I must perforce depend on translation if I try to put Keats's tears poem in the context of worldwide literature about tears. I am sure that innumerable examples exist, not only in Urdu and Arabic, but also from all those countries listed in the blurb for Bloomsbury's forthcoming crime fiction book mentioned above. I conclude this essay with one brief example of juxtaposing Ruth's tears in Keats's poems with tears poems in "world literature." The example is so small as not to justify any sweeping generalizations about tears poems in literature around the globe, such I have somewhat hesitantly made for my sequence of European tears poems.

Let me imagine that, fascinated, emboldened, and inspired by the new discipline of world literature, I remember that I have an old book in my library called *Sanskrit Poetry*.¹⁰ I have never paid much attention to this book; "out of my field," I have always said to myself. I do not know Sanskrit, to my shame. Nevertheless, I ask myself, "Sanskrit poetry is surely part of 'world literature.' Are there any Sanskrit poems about tears?" Sure enough, I find in this book a section of very beautiful short poems about tears; at least they are very beautiful in translation.

In his "General Introduction," the editor and translator of this book, Daniel H.H. Ingalls, gives the ignorant reader, such as myself, all sorts of fascinating information about the Sanskrit language, about Sanskrit poetry, and about Sanskrit poetics. I cannot summarize that introduction in detail here. You must read it for yourself,

dear reader. I learned from Ingalls that Sanskrit is a marvelous language for subtle poetry. It is even more highly inflected than Latin or Greek; it is given to elaborate compounds; it has a fixed grammar that remained the same for hundreds and hundreds of years; and, it has amazing semantic resources. A given common word “like ‘king’ or ‘rain-cloud’ or ‘mistress’” (8) might have two or three hundred synonyms. What in English would require a lot of words and several sentences can be said in Sanskrit in a couple of juxtaposed compound words. Ingalls gives an “almost unintelligible” literal translation of one four-line stanza: “It is possible, if by your fingers plucked, with these soft under-the-branches-fallen-flowers, these leaf-shaken moonbeam drops, to deck your hair” (4).

390 There is Sanskrit poetry, in a moonbeam drop. We learn from Ingalls’s introduction, moreover, that Sanskrit poetry was an upper-class poetry that has flourished in Bengal for over two thousand years, that it is extremely complex in its metrical, formal, figurative, generic, and thematic conventions, and that Sanskrit poetry is beautiful and powerful in its apparent simplicity. A four-line stanza is the basic unit of this poetry, but these stanzas may fall into one of about fifty recognized metrical patterns. Sanskrit poems are almost all short. Many are made up of only two four-line stanzas.

Ingalls’s introduction gives an account of Sanskrit poetics. It was, as might have been expected, quite complex and reticulated, but it centered on the idea that poetry (*kāvya*) must express “mood” (*rasa*) and “suggestion.” The latter is compared to the resonance of a bell after it is struck: “Sanskrit critics and commentators are wonderfully acute at catching and rendering precise these subtleties” (Ingalls 19). Here, Ingalls adds what is, for my essay, a wonderfully serendipitous footnote. This footnote, amazingly, links Sanskrit poetry and poetics to just my passage from Keats’s poem. Ingalls imagines how a Sanskrit critic or “pandit” might have commented on the “suggestions” of Keats’s word “alien.” I give the entire footnote in an endnote of my own, since it is rather long.¹¹

We also learn that Ingalls’s *Sanskrit Poetry* consists of translations of selected poems from a celebrated poetry anthology, the *Treasury of Well-Turned Verse*. This anthology was compiled in the late eleventh century AD by a Buddhist monk named Vidyākara. Ingalls’s *Sanskrit Poetry* is based on his scholarly edition of the whole of Vidyākara’s *Treasury* published by him in 1965. Vidyākara was probably the abbot of the Jagaddala Monastery. The poems he chose are mostly from 600 AD to 1050 AD, and probably came from his monastery library. The names of the authors of many of the individual poems are known and given by Vidyākara, or sometimes added by later authorities on the basis of other sources. Often, not all that much is known about the author of a given poem beyond the name and the names of other works by that poet.

Vidyākara organized his anthology into groups exemplifying types or genres of poetry. Many, but by no means all, of these types are chastely erotic poems. They are chaste in the sense that the sex act is not explicitly described. Among those types are,

in Section 22, short poems about “The Lady Parted from Her Lover.” Some of these ladies are young wives whose husbands are away. Some are maidens in love. In some of these poems, the lonely lady speaks. In some, the poet speaks of the lady’s sad state. Ingalls translates fifteen of these type poems, five of which mention tears explicitly, once in the figure of “drippings from my own heart’s lamp” (no. 705; Ingalls 176), and by literal name in four cases:

How beautiful the tear-filled voice
With which the lady calls. (no. 718; Ingalls 177)

A wave of tears o’erflows her eye (no. 729; Ingalls 178)

The teardrops, formed upon your lashes
Like so many pearls,
In dropping to your bosom make a necklace
Whiter than Siva’s smile. (no. 734; Ingalls 178)

Why, slender maid, are these drops of tears,
Black from the collyrium [a cosmetic] they have washed,
Scattered in atoms on your breast
That surges with your sighs? (no. 737; Ingalls 179)

What happens if I compare Ruth’s tears amid the alien corn in Keats’s poem, not with all those European tears I have cited, but with these Sanskrit tears? In spite of similarities that allow Ingalls plausibly to imagine what a Sanskrit critic might have said about Keats’s lines, there are major differences between Keats’s poem (or my other European tears poem) and the Sanskrit tears poems. All of these poems, however, both the European ones and the Sanskrit ones, are extraordinarily beautiful, even in translation. They are beautiful not only in the sense of being emotionally powerful, but also in the sense of generating intense visual images and, by empathy, strong kinesthetic or kinetic responses. After all, most European readers know *The Book of Ruth* in one or another English translation. I can feel those tears rising to the eyes and falling on the breasts of these ladies parted from their lovers. My heart goes out to Ruth standing in tears amid the alien corn. I have pity for Keats’s Ruth, but not for the Biblical Ruth, who is busy getting a new and rich “alien” Hebrew husband for herself while she gleanes. The Biblical Ruth is not said to be at all homesick for her homeland of Moab.

This might be the moment to mention the entirely fortuitous fact that Ruth is a Hebrew given name perhaps contracted from a Hebrew word meaning ‘companion,’ while “ruth” is a modern English word derived from Middle English, *rewen*, ‘to rue,’ and before that, from Old English, *hrēowan*. The noun “ruth” means ‘compassion or pity,’ as well as ‘sorrow, misery, grief.’

I conclude this essay by asking and briefly answering the following question: What are the differences between what happens if I read Keats's lines about Ruth's tears more or less in isolation, out of any contexts, as if I had found them on a loose sheet of paper in the grass, as the New Critics sometimes seemed to advise, or if I read these lines in a Eurocentric comparative literature context, or if I read them in a world literature context? As Ingalls himself explicitly says, what matters most is what happens to me when I read this or that poem or lines from it, not whether I can apply a given theory to the text. "But the path of the critic," says Ingalls with his characteristic succinct wisdom, "must begin with poetry, not with theories of poetry" (47).¹²

My endnote above and the other comments I have made along the way in this essay indicate that one can get quite a distance with Keats's lines without having anything beyond an English dictionary to work with. Much can be said, for example, about the powerful and subtle musical effect of alliteration and assonance in these lines, for example, the *Ts*, *Ss*, *Os*, and *Ds* in "stood in tears amid the alien corn" that make the words a beautiful braided counterpoint of sounds that are at first slow and then accelerate with "amid the alien corn."

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Nevertheless, I would be likely to find myself asking who "Ruth" was, whether other poems about tears exist in European poetry, or in world-wide poetry, and so on. Are Keats's lines about Ruth "typical" or "idiosyncratic"? If I ask these questions and do some "research," I soon find that many tears poems exist both in the European context and in the world literature context, as my examples above demonstrate. What is the difference between those two contexts?

My European tears poems have several salient characteristics:

First: European tears poems tend to identify the person whose tears flow by name and to specify just why he or she is weeping: from Adam and Eve, Ruth, Jesus, and Niobe through Gertrude, Wordsworth, Goethe, Hopkins, and Margaret. That the source of the tears in Rilke's "Tränenkrüglein," "Little Jug of Tears," is not identified makes it the odd one out in my list of tears poems.

Second: The reasons the tears flow in European poems are strikingly different from example to example: from Adam and Eve's grief for being expelled from Eden, to Jesus's grief for the dead Lazarus, to Niobe's grief for her dead children, to Hrothgar's tears at parting from Beowulf, on down through Ruth's tears of homesickness to Margaret's tears for the fall of leaves in the autumn, though really tears for her own immortality. No universal reason for crying exists in European poetry.

Third: European poems about tears belong to no particular genre, stanza form, or meter. European weepers may be found in sacred texts, in epics, in dramas, in long narrative poems, in "odes," in lyrics: in more or less any literary form used by Western writers from the Greeks and the Bible onward.

The bottom line is that each European tears poem is, in multiple ways, unique. Comparing Ruth's tears in Keats's poem with my other examples in teaching or writ-

ing within the discipline of Eurocentric comparative literature is a way of revealing and investigating the distinctiveness of a given example, the way it is different from all the other examples. No other tears poem exists that is much like Keats's segment about Ruth in the "Ode to a Nightingale."

Tears poems in world literature are quite different, at least if my Sanskrit poems are taken as at all exemplary. That may or may not be the case. Investigating all tears poems worldwide would be a virtually endless task. Think of all those tears poems that probably exist in Urdu or in Arabic! The question of exemplarity is one of the big problems with world literature as a discipline: an unmanageably large number of poems that fit the criteria, for example, the presence of someone weeping.

If I limit myself, quite arbitrarily, just to the fifteen poems about "The Lady Parted from Her Lover" in Ingalls's selection from Vidyākara's eleventh-century *Treasury*, I would conclude, though in a different way from what I say about the Eurocentric tradition, that Keats's poem differs fundamentally from my Sanskrit examples in the following ways:

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First, none of the Sanskrit poems identify the lady by name as anyone in particular. She is just a weeping wife or lover.

Second, the Sanskrit poems all belong to a recognizable "type" in theme, form, and meter. They are all poems about ladies who weep because they are parted from their lovers. It as if each of these poets had sat down, saying to himself or herself: "I shall now write a 'The Lady Parted from Her Lover' poem that fits all the requirements for such a poem." Such "types" are rare in European poetry, though perhaps the Elizabethan love sonnet might be adduced as an example. Keats's poem does not fit any such "type" form.

Third, Keats's poem and my other European examples tend to mention explicitly some story or name that binds the European tradition together and makes it a tradition going from the Greeks and the Bible to the present. Keats's poem alludes to the Biblical *Book of Ruth*, Hamlet compares Gertrude to Niobe, and so on. No such references exist in the Sanskrit tears poems, except nominal ones. We get one mention of the "god who wears the moon" (that is, Chandra, the Buddhist God of the moon), a reference to the Buddha, and another to "Śiva's smile" (poems 701, 733; Ingalls 176, 178). Śiva is the Hindu God of Destruction and Transformation. Representations show him sitting in a yoga pose with eyes closed and smiling an enigmatic smile. These references are quite different from, say, Keats's mention of Ruth or Shakespeare's mention of Niobe. The Sanskrit references tell the reader little more than that these are poems in the Buddhist or Hindu tradition, whereas "Ruth" or "Niobe" refer the reader to specific stories in the European tradition.

I conclude that reading Keats's beautiful lines about Ruth's tears in either a comparative literature context or a world literature context is chiefly useful as a way to confront the specificity of "Ode to a Nightingale," its dissimilarity from any other poem. There is not much else like it. The reader is more or less left on her or his own, without much help from either context, confronting the lines on the page in their

striking individuality and power:

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn...

NOTES

1. Oddly given as “the valley of Baca” in the King James Bible; “valle lacrimum” in the Latin Vulgate. “This vale of tears” is idiomatic in both spoken and written English, often used without evidence that the user remembers the Biblical source. In the “General Introduction” to his magisterial *Sanskrit Poetry* (of which more below), Daniel H.H. Ingalls uses the phrase ironically: “It is well that we can laugh at each other in this vale of tears, but it would be sad indeed should we stop at no more than that” (27). Ingalls is writing of the way European and American critics laugh at Sanskrit poetry, while Sanskrit critics might laugh at European poetry.
- 394 2. These are Jesus’s tears for the dead Lazarus, whom he had loved and whom he raises from the dead.
3. See “Tears Poems” at *High on Poems*. Get high by reading poems with tears in them!
4. See “Is Universal Harmony Worth the Tears of a Tortured Child?”
5. The Ariadne myth is still very much alive in the twentieth century, for example, in Richard Strauss’s great opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912), or in T.S. Eliot’s lines in “Sweeney Erect”: “Display me Aeolus above, / Reviewing the insurgent gales / Which tangle Ariadne’s hair, / And swell with haste the perjured sails” (qtd. in Kumar 80).
6. See Newstok, “Dido’s Tears.” My wife and I once saw, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, a splendid performance of *Les Troyens* in which the great singer Jesse Norman died twice, the first time as Cassandra and then again as Dido when the singer meant to perform the role of Dido fell ill. Norman admirably rose to the occasion.
7. See my “Temporal Topographies: Tennyson’s Tears” and “Literature Matters Today.”
8. See, for example, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoebe_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoebe_(mythology)); en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selene; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silenus#Scientific_nomenclature; www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=SIAN2.
9. See Sigmund Freud’s essay, “Das Unheimliche” (1919). Freud defines the uncanny as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (1-2). An enormous literature on the uncanny has appeared in recent years.
10. Vidyākara’s *Subhasitaratnakosa* (*Treasury of Well-Turned Verse*) was compiled in eleventh-century Bengal. Ingalls published a scholarly edition of the whole of the *Subhasitaratnakosa* in 1957. I immensely admire Ingalls and his work. He was Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard. Not only was he immensely learned, but also, he was impressively humane. His commentary is enlightened as well as learned, and his translations are admirable poetry in English. I tip my hat to him or to his ghost. He died in 1999. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_H._H._Ingalls_Sr for more information about Ingalls and his outstanding work in scholarship and teaching. Like some other distinguished Orientalists, he majored in Greek and Latin as an undergraduate, in his case at Harvard.
11. “To show the method of analysis one may manufacture a pandit’s comment for a word of English verse:
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn.
‘Alien’ in Latin and English denotes ‘belonging to another, foreign,’ a meaning which is possible

but insufficient in Keats' line. By indication the word has come, in English, to mean 'belonging to another land, a stranger, an enemy.' The suggestion generated by using 'alien' with its indicative sense rather than a single-valued adjective like 'foreign' is that the whole land was turned against Ruth, even the grain that she gleaned. The suggestion intensifies the mood of compassion."

My comment: This is a brilliant imitation or parody of Sanskrit poetic commentary. It includes an illuminating use of two key Sanskrit poetic concepts: "suggestion" and "mood." I now understand better just what Sanskrit critics meant by these all-important words. I also get a brilliant new perspective on my lines from Keats, though only indirect help with my key word, "tears." Ruth weeps because she is in a land that is "alien" in the complex "indicative" or "suggestive" senses that Ingalls specifies. What Ingalls imagines a Sanskrit pandit saying about "alien" is not far from what William Empson says about other such "suggestive" or multivalent words in *The Structure of Complex Words*.

12. Ingalls is writing in opposition to the Marxist readings of Sanskrit poetry by D.D. Kosambi, a distinguished Sanskrit scholar.

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